

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF NORTH DAKOTA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Plaintiff,

v.

JAMES WESLEY BERNARD,

Defendant.

Case No. 1:18-cr-90

**UNITED STATES' RESPONSE TO
DEFENDANT'S MOTION FOR
COMPASSIONATE RELEASE
PURSUANT TO 18 U.S.C. §
3582(c)(1)(A)(i)**

The United States of America, by Drew H. Wrigley, United States Attorney for the District of North Dakota, and Dawn M. Deitz, Assistant United States Attorney, hereby files this response to Defendant's Motion for Compassionate Release Pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)(i).

Defendant has filed a motion asking this Court to reduce his sentence of imprisonment under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) and order a reduced sentence to home confinement, relying in part on the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Doc. 142.) The United States respectfully opposes the motion. This Court should deny the motion because Defendant has not met his burden of establishing that a sentence reduction is warranted under the statute.

I. BOP's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

As this Court is well aware, COVID-19 is an extremely dangerous illness that has caused many deaths in the United States in a short period of time and that has resulted in massive disruption to our society and economy. In response to the pandemic, BOP has taken significant measures to protect the health of the inmates in its charge.

BOP has explained that “maintaining safety and security of [BOP] institutions is [BOP’s] highest priority.” BOP, Updates to BOP COVID-19 Action Plan: Inmate Movement (Mar. 19, 2020), available at

[https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20200319_covid19_update.jsp.](https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20200319_covid19_update.jsp)

Indeed, BOP has had a Pandemic Influenza Plan in place since 2012. BOP Health Services Division, Pandemic Influenza Plan-Module 1: Surveillance and Infection Control (Oct. 2012), available at

https://www.bop.gov/resources/pdfs/pan_flu_module_1.pdf. That protocol is lengthy and detailed, establishing a six-phase framework requiring BOP facilities to begin preparations when there is first a “[s]uspected human outbreak overseas.” *Id.* at i. The plan addresses social distancing, hygienic and cleaning protocols, and the quarantining and treatment of symptomatic inmates.

Consistent with that plan, BOP began planning for potential coronavirus transmissions in January. At that time, the agency established a working group to develop policies in consultation with subject matter experts in the Centers for Disease Control, including by reviewing guidance from the World Health Organization.

On March 13, 2020, BOP began to modify its operations, in accordance with its Coronavirus (COVID-19) Action Plan (“Action Plan”), to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission into and inside its facilities. Since that time, as events require, BOP has repeatedly revised the Action Plan to address the crisis.

Beginning April 1, 2020, BOP implemented Phase Five of the Action Plan, which currently governs operations. The current modified operations plan requires that all

inmates in every BOP institution be secured in their assigned cells/quarters for a period of at least 14 days, in order to stop any spread of the disease. Only limited group gathering is afforded, with attention to social distancing to the extent possible, to facilitate commissary, laundry, showers, telephone, and computer access. Further, BOP has severely limited the movement of inmates and detainees among its facilities. Though there will be exceptions for medical treatment and similar exigencies, this step as well will limit transmissions of the disease. Likewise, all official staff travel has been cancelled, as has most staff training.

All staff and inmates have been and will continue to be issued face masks and strongly encouraged to wear an appropriate face covering when in public areas when social distancing cannot be achieved.

Every newly admitted inmate is screened for COVID-19 exposure risk factors and symptoms. Asymptomatic inmates with risk of exposure are placed in quarantine for a minimum of 14 days or until cleared by medical staff. Symptomatic inmates are placed in isolation until they test negative for COVID-19 or are cleared by medical staff as meeting CDC criteria for release from isolation. In addition, in areas with sustained community transmission, such as Philadelphia, all facility staff are screened for symptoms. Staff registering a temperature of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or higher are barred from the facility on that basis alone. A staff member with a stuffy or runny nose can be placed on leave by a medical officer.

Contractor access to BOP facilities is restricted to only those performing essential services (e.g. medical or mental health care, religious, etc.) or those who perform

necessary maintenance on essential systems. All volunteer visits are suspended absent authorization by the Deputy Director of BOP. Any contractor or volunteer who requires access will be screened for symptoms and risk factors.

Social and legal visits were stopped as of March 13, and remain suspended until at least May 18, 2020, to limit the number of people entering the facility and interacting with inmates. In order to ensure that familial relationships are maintained throughout this disruption, BOP has increased detainees' telephone allowance to 500 minutes per month. Tours of facilities are also suspended. Legal visits will be permitted on a case-by-case basis after the attorney has been screened for infection in accordance with the screening protocols for prison staff.

Further details and updates of BOP's modified operations are available to the public on the BOP website at a regularly updated resource page:
www.bop.gov/coronavirus/index.jsp.

In addition, in an effort to relieve the strain on BOP facilities and assist inmates who are most vulnerable to the disease and pose the least threat to the community, BOP is exercising greater authority to designate inmates for home confinement. On March 26, 2020, the Attorney General directed the Director of the Bureau of Prisons, upon considering the totality of the circumstances concerning each inmate, to prioritize the use of statutory authority to place prisoners in home confinement. That authority includes the ability to place an inmate in home confinement during the last six months or 10% of a sentence, whichever is shorter, see 18 U.S.C. § 3624(c)(2), and to move to home confinement those elderly and terminally ill inmates specified in 34 U.S.C. § 60541(g).

Congress has also acted to enhance BOP's flexibility to respond to the pandemic. Under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, enacted on March 27, 2020, BOP may "lengthen the maximum amount of time for which the Director is authorized to place a prisoner in home confinement" if the Attorney General finds that emergency conditions will materially affect the functioning of BOP. Pub. L. No. 116-136, § 12003(b)(2), 134 Stat. 281, 516 (to be codified at 18 U.S.C. § 3621 note). On April 3, 2020, the Attorney General gave the Director of BOP the authority to exercise this discretion, beginning at the facilities that thus far have seen the greatest incidence of coronavirus transmission.¹ As of this filing, BOP has transferred over 3,900 inmates to home confinement.²³ Taken together, all of these measures are designed to mitigate sharply the risks of COVID-19 transmission in a BOP institution. BOP has pledged to continue monitoring the pandemic and to adjust its practices as necessary to maintain the safety of prison staff and inmates while also fulfilling its mandate of incarcerating all persons sentenced or detained based on judicial orders.

Unfortunately and inevitably, some inmates have become ill, and more likely will in the weeks ahead. But BOP must consider its concern for the health of its inmates and staff alongside other critical considerations. For example, notwithstanding the current pandemic crisis, BOP must carry out its charge to incarcerate sentenced criminals to

¹ Attorney General Memorandum for Director of Bureau of Prisons, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1266661/download>, April 3, 2020.

² Coronavirus Updates, Bureau of Prison, <https://www.bop.gov/coronavirus/>, last accessed on June 10, 2020.

³ Update on COVID-19 and Home Confinement, Bureau of Prisons, https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20200405_covid19_home_confinement.jsp, last accessed on April 24, 2020.

protect the public. It must consider the effect of a mass release on the safety and health of both the inmate population and the citizenry. It must marshal its resources to care for inmates in the most efficient and beneficial manner possible. It must assess release plans, which are essential to ensure that a defendant has a safe place to live and access to health care in these difficult times. And it must consider myriad other factors, including the availability of both transportation for inmates (at a time that interstate transportation services often used by released inmates are providing reduced service), and supervision of inmates once released (at a time that the Probation Office has necessarily cut back on home visits and supervision).

II. Defendant's Conviction and Request for a Sentence Reduction

On June 1, 2020, Defendant filed a motion with this Court seeking compassionate release under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) citing concerns of contracting COVID. (Doc. 142.) According to BOP, Defendant has filed for request for compassionate release which have been denied by the Warden. (Government's Exhibits 1-3). Defendant has not filed an appeal of the denial of his request. Id. Furthermore, Defendant is not currently being considered by BOP for home confinement. Id.

A. Legal Framework

Under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A), this Court may, in certain circumstances, grant a defendant's motion to reduce his or her term of imprisonment. Before filing that motion, however, the defendant must first request that BOP file such a motion on his behalf. § 3582(c)(1)(A). A court may grant the defendant's own motion for a reduction in his sentence only if the motion was filed "after the defendant has fully exhausted all

administrative rights to appeal a failure of the Bureau of Prisons to bring a motion on the defendant’s behalf” or after 30 days have passed “from the receipt of such a request by the warden of the defendant’s facility, whichever is earlier.” Id.

If that exhaustion requirement is met, a court may reduce the defendant’s term of imprisonment “after considering the factors set forth in [18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)]” if the Court finds, as relevant here, that (i) “extraordinary and compelling reasons warrant such a reduction” and (ii) “such a reduction is consistent with applicable policy statements issued by the Sentencing Commission.” § 3582(c)(1)(A)(i). As the movant, the defendant bears the burden to establish that he is eligible for a sentence reduction. United States v. Jones, 836 F.3d 896, 899 (8th Cir. 2016); United States v. Green, 764 F.3d 1352, 1356 (11th Cir. 2014).

The Sentencing Commission has issued a policy statement addressing reduction of sentences under § 3582(c)(1)(A). As relevant here, the policy statement provides that a court may reduce the term of imprisonment after considering the § 3553(a) factors if the Court finds that (i) “extraordinary and compelling reasons warrant the reduction;” (ii) “the defendant is not a danger to the safety of any other person or to the community, as provided in 18 U.S.C. § 3142(g);” and (iii) “the reduction is consistent with this policy statement.” USSG § 1B1.13.⁴

⁴ The policy statement refers only to motions filed by the BOP Director. That is because the policy statement was last amended on November 1, 2018, and until the enactment of the First Step Act on December 21, 2018, defendants were not entitled to file motions under § 3582(c). See First Step Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-391, § 603(b), 132 Stat. 5194, 5239; cf. 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c) (2012). In light of the statutory command that any sentence reduction be “consistent with applicable policy statements issued by the Sentencing Commission,” § 3582(c)(1)(A)(ii), and the lack of any plausible reason to treat motions

The policy statement includes an application note that specifies the types of medical conditions that qualify as “extraordinary and compelling reasons.” First, that standard is met if the defendant is “suffering from a terminal illness,” such as “metastatic solid-tumor cancer, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), end-stage organ disease, [or] advanced dementia.” USSG § 1B1.13, cmt. n.1(A)(i). Second, the standard is met if the defendant is:

- (I) suffering from a serious physical or medical condition,
- (II) suffering from a serious functional or cognitive impairment, or
- (III) experiencing deteriorating physical or mental health because of the aging process,

that substantially diminishes the ability of the defendant to provide self-care within the environment of a correctional facility and from which he or she is not expected to recover.

USSG § 1B1.13, cmt. n.1(A)(ii). The application note also sets out other conditions and characteristics that qualify as “extraordinary and compelling reasons” related to the defendant’s age and family circumstances. USSG § 1B1.13, cmt. n.1(B)-(C). Finally, the note recognizes the possibility that BOP could identify other grounds that amount to “extraordinary and compelling reasons.” USSG § 1B1.13, cmt. n.1(D).

B. Arguments

This Court should deny it with prejudice on either of two independently sufficient grounds. First, Defendant has not established that “extraordinary and compelling reasons” support a sentence reduction; second, Defendant has not met his burden to show that a

filed by defendants differently from motions filed by BOP, the policy statement applies to motions filed by defendants as well.

reduction is warranted in light of the danger that Defendant would pose to the community and the relevant § 3553(a) factors. In addition, this Court lacks statutory authority to grant direct BOP to transfer Defendant to home confinement.

i. The Court Should Deny The Motion Because Defendant Has Failed to Present Any “Extraordinary and Compelling Reasons” Warranting a Sentence Reduction and Because He Poses a Danger to Public Safety.

Defendant’s motion for compassionate release should be denied for two reasons. First, Defendant has not identified “extraordinary and compelling reasons” for that reduction within the meaning of § 3582(c)(1)(A) and the Sentencing Commission’s policy statement. Second, Defendant poses a significant danger to the public and the statutory sentencing factors do not weigh in favor of his release.

A. Defendant Has Not Identified “Extraordinary and Compelling Reasons” for a Sentence Reduction.

Defendant’s request for a sentence reduction should be denied because he has not demonstrated “extraordinary and compelling reasons” warranting release. As explained above, under the relevant provision of § 3582(c), a court can grant a sentence reduction only if it determines that “extraordinary and compelling reasons” justify the reduction and that “such a reduction is consistent with applicable policy statements issued by the Sentencing Commission.” 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)(i). The Sentencing Commission’s policy statement defines “extraordinary and compelling reasons” to include, as relevant here, certain specified categories of medical conditions. USSG § 1B1.13, cmt. n.1(A).

For that reason, to state a cognizable basis for a sentence reduction based on a medical condition, a defendant first must establish that his condition falls within one of

the categories listed in the policy statement. Those categories include, as particularly relevant here, (i) any terminal illness, and (ii) any “serious physical or medical condition . . . that substantially diminishes the ability of the defendant to provide self-care within the environment of a correctional facility and from which he or she is not expected to recover.” USSG 1B1.13, cmt. n.1(A). If a defendant’s medical condition does not fall within one of the categories specified in the application note (and no other part of the application note applies), his motion must be denied.

The mere existence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which poses a general threat to every non-immune person in the country, does not fall into either of those categories and therefore could not alone provide a basis for a sentence reduction. The categories encompass specific serious medical conditions afflicting an individual inmate, not generalized threats to the entire population. As the Third Circuit has held, “the mere existence of COVID-19 in society and the possibility that it may spread to a particular prison alone cannot independently justify compassionate release.” Raia, 954 F.3d at 597; see also Eberhart, 2020 WL 1450745 at *2 (“a reduction of sentence due solely to concerns about the spread of COVID-19 is not consistent with the applicable policy statement of the Sentencing Commission as required by § 3582(c)(1)(A).”)⁵ To classify

⁵ See also, e.g., United States v. Coles, 2020 WL 1899562 (E.D. Mich. Apr. 17, 2020) (denied for 28-year-old inmate at institution with outbreak); United States v. Okpala, 2020 WL 1864889 (E.D.N.Y. Apr. 14, 2020); United States v. Weeks, 2020 WL 1862634 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 14, 2020); United States v. Haney, 2020 WL 1821988 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 13, 2020) (denied for 61-year-old with no other conditions); United States v. Pinto-Thomaz, 2020 WL 1845875 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 13, 2020) (two insider trading defendants with less than a year to serve have no risk factors); United States v. Korn, 2020 WL 1808213, at *6 (W.D.N.Y. Apr. 9, 2020) (“in this Court’s view, the mere *possibility* of contracting a communicable disease such as COVID-19, without any showing that the Bureau of Prisons will not or cannot guard against or treat such a disease, does not constitute an extraordinary or compelling reason for a sentence

COVID-19 as an extraordinary and compelling reason would not only be inconsistent with the text of the statute and the policy statement, but would be detrimental to BOP’s organized and comprehensive anti-COVID-19 regimens, could result in the scattershot treatment of inmates, and would undercut the strict criteria BOP employs to determine individual inmates’ eligibility for sentence reductions and home confinement.

Section 3582(c)(1)(A) contemplates sentence reductions for specific individuals, not the widespread prophylactic release of inmates and the modification of lawfully imposed sentences to deal with a world-wide viral pandemic.

That does not mean, however, that COVID-19 is irrelevant to a court’s analysis of a motion under § 3582(c)(1)(A). If an inmate has a chronic medical condition that has been identified by the CDC as elevating the inmate’s risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19,⁶ that condition may satisfy the standard of “extraordinary and compelling reasons.” Under these circumstances, a chronic condition (*i.e.*, one “from which [the defendant] is not expected to recover”) reasonably may be found to be “serious” and to “substantially diminish[] the ability of the defendant to provide self-care within the environment of a correctional facility,” even if that condition would not have constituted an “extraordinary and compelling reason” absent the risk of COVID-19. USSG § 1B1.13, cmt. n.1(A)(ii)(I). But as part of its analysis of the totality of circumstances, the Court

reduction under the statutory scheme.”); United States v. Carver, 2020 WL 1892340 (E.D. Wash. Apr. 8, 2020).

⁶ See Centers for Disease Control, *At Risk for Severe Illness*, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/groups-at-higher-risk.html> (last modified Apr. 2, 2020).

should consider whether the inmate is more likely to contract COVID-19 if he is released than if he remains incarcerated. That will typically depend on the inmate's proposed release plans and whether a known outbreak has occurred at his institution.

In this case, Defendant has asserted that he is a “chronic care patient” which makes him more vulnerable to becoming seriously ill should he contract COVID-19. (Doc. 142.) The undersigned requested documentation pertinent to Defendant’s motion for compassionate release; no medical records were provided to the United States. Government’s Exhibit 1-3. However, BOP would have access to Defendant’s medical documents while Defendant has been incarcerated with BOP. Thus, BOP would have been in superior position to assess whether Defendant’s medical condition and/or situation was appropriate through administrative compassionate release. BOP ultimately determined Defendant’s administrative request indicating “concerns about being potentially exposed to, or possibly contracting, COVID-19 does not currently warrant an early release...”. (Government’s Exhibit 3.) Thus, that Defendant’s contentions do not establish “extraordinary and compelling reasons” for a sentence reduction under § 3582(c)(1)(A) and so Defendant’s motion cannot be granted.

For these reasons, Defendant has failed to establish an “extraordinary and compelling reason” for a sentence reduction under § 3582(c). The motion should be denied.

B. Defendant Still Poses a Significant Danger to the Safety of the Community and the § 3553(A) Factors Strongly Weigh Against His Release.

Alternatively, Defendant's request for a sentence reduction should be denied because he has failed to demonstrate that he is not a danger to the safety of the community or otherwise merits release under the § 3553(a) factors.

Under the applicable policy statement, this Court must deny a sentence reduction unless it determines the defendant "is not a danger to the safety of any other person or to the community." USSG § 1B1.13(2). Additionally, this Court must consider the § 3553(a) factors, as "applicable," as part of its analysis. See § 3582(c)(1)(A); United States v. Chambliss, 948 F.3d 691, 694 (5th Cir. 2020).

Defendant would pose a danger to public safety if released. This Court should deny a sentence reduction on that basis alone. The Attorney General has directed that BOP prioritize transferring inmates to home confinement in appropriate circumstances when those inmates are vulnerable to COVID-19 under the CDC risk factors—particularly those at institutions where there have been COVID-19 outbreaks. BOP is devoting all available resources to executing that directive. BOP is devoting all available resources to assessing the inmate population to determine which inmates would be appropriate for transfer under this priority program and to then process those inmates for transfer as quickly as possible. If an inmate cannot obtain home confinement under BOP's priority program, then he or she is likely not a suitable candidate for compassionate release either.

Moreover, the factors militating against a sentence reduction outweigh Defendant's asserted concerns related to COVID-19. Even if this Court concludes (contrary to the argument set forth in the previous section) that Defendant has established "extraordinary and compelling reasons" for a sentence reduction based on the risk of contracting COVID-19, Defendant has not established that he would be less vulnerable to COVID-19 if he were released. Accordingly, in light of Defendant's record and the totality of relevant circumstances, this Court should deny the motion for a sentence reduction.

Conclusion

For these reasons, this Court should deny Defendant's motion for a sentence reduction for failure to exhaust administrative remedies or, in the alternative, deny the motion on the merits.

Dated: June 10, 2020.

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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on June 15, 2020, the following document:

United States' Response To Defendant's Motion For Compassionate Release Pursuant To
18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)(i)

was filed electronically with the Clerk of Court through ECF.

I further certify that a copy of the foregoing documents will be mailed by first class mail, postage paid, to the following non-ECF participant(s):

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Dated: June 15, 2020

By: /s/ Vicki Thompson
VICKI THOMPSON
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